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ABSTRACT

A counselor with a dyslexic-like disability shares three conclusions concerning this type of disability. First, difficulties with reading, math, writing, heard language, and nonverbal language are not the disability but the symptom of the disability. Second, these disabilities are dynamic in nature and therefore the symptoms fluctuate somewhere between minimal and severe from one minute to the next or from one day to the next. Third, the choices the individual with the disability makes and the choices that are made for that individual by others will determine how disabled that person is by the disability. Dyslexic-like symptoms are thought to occur when one or more of the language process systems is out of sync (timing) with the other processes in the system. An example is given showing how the normally automatic reading process becomes a five-step manual process for the individual with a dyslexic-like disability. Conclusions that involve compensating through wise choices and the use of technology are discussed. (DB)

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Learning Disabilities, An Understanding and Definition

by
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The school year can be a hectic time for parents as well as the students and teachers. This is especially so if the student has a learning disability. There is often a great deal of confusion about what a learning disability actually is and what modifications are appropriate for students/individuals with these disabilities. It is therefore important that there be a clear and meaningful understanding and definition of these disabilities.

The term learning disabilities has been used to include a wide spectrum of disabilities. For this reason I use the term dyslexic-like disability to refer to the following disabilities: dyslexia - difficulty reading; dyscalcula - difficulty with arithmetic; dysgraphia - difficulty with writing; auditory dyslexia - difficulty with heard language; and dyssemia - difficulty interpreting nonverbal language.

My experience as a person with a dyslexic-like disability, (I attended thirteen different elementary schools, six weeks of high school, hold two masters degrees, and national certification as a professional counselor) has led me to three essential conclusions concerning these particular disabilities. These three conclusions are:

> The difficulty with reading, math, writing, heard language and nonverbal language is not the disability but the symptom of the disability.
>
> These disabilities are dynamic in nature and therefore the symptoms fluctuate somewhere between minimal and severe from one minute to the next or from one day to the next.
>
> The choices the individual with the disability makes and the choices that are made for that individual by others will determine how disabled that person is by his or her disability.

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Dyslexic-like symptoms occur when one or more of the language processing systems is out of sync (timing) with the other processes in the system. The result is that the person with the asynchronous timing only perceives fragments of the incoming information. The reading process then becomes a manual task rather than an automatic or semantic one.

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Figure 1. shows what is perceived by the person with a dyslexic-like disability when he or she looks at printed words on a page. The process of converting these fragments into words with meaning is manual rather then automatic. People with this disability must first connect the dots until they see the picture, then sound out the picture until they hear the sound which they recognize as a word. Once the word is heard, they can associate a meaning to the picture. This meaning must then be tested in the context of the sentence to determine if it is the correct word and meaning. Therefore the individual with dyslexic-like disability must hear a word before it can have any meaning. This process must be followed for each and every word or syllable if necessary in anything that is read. There is no way around this. Once they have learned the basic methods of reading additional remediating of reading or spelling in these individuals is of little value and can be counter productive, creating additional problems. It must be understood that people with dyslexic-like disability know how to read. They can't do it because of the "out of sync" timing mentioned earlier, not because they do not know how. The solution is to compensate through wise choices and the use of technology, often freely available to everyone with certification of a dyslexic-like disability.

The second conclusion that I came to is that these perceptual disabilities are dynamic and therefore the symptoms fluctuate. We tend to think of a disability as something permanent. It is rather foolish to expect a person paralyzed from the neck down to get up out of a wheelchair and play a quarter of football and then return to the wheelchair. This however is exactly what happens to a person with a dyslexic-like disability as discussed here. Sometimes a person with a dyslexic-like disability does not appear to be disabled and does not exhibit any symptoms. Generally this "window" state does not last very long and the symptoms return as before. The cause of this, I believe, is that the process timing is variable. Sometimes the timing of the processes all line up and the person perceives all of the information instead of the fragments. In this case the person sees the whole picture (word) in the minds eye and can sound out that picture quickly and hear the word to get the meaning. Eighty to ninety percent of the reading process for people with dyslexia is consumed in figuring out what the word is and connecting the dots. Since this is not necessary when the timing is in sync,"the window", the reading speed is greatly improved but still manual and not automatic or semantic. Remember that even a broken clock has the correct time twice a day.

The real problem with this window experience is that it tends to lead the person with a dyslexic-like disability into thinking that they are lazy and if they would just try a little harder, they can learn to read, write, spell, do arithmetic, and perceive language like everyone else. A second problem is that

if this window opens while you are reading in class or to a parent the comment is usually, "Don't tell me you can't read, you just read that as well as I could." This may be true for the moment but a few minutes later, that same person can't read the word cat. It is important to realize that this dynamic aspect of the disability is one of the symptoms of the disability and not proof that there is no disability or that there is a cure. If the cures and fixes publicized by so many were true, I would not need to write this and you would not be reading it.

The third conclusion is that the choices a person with a dyslexic-like disability makes, or choices that are made by others for him or her will determine that persons degree of disability. A teacher that does not allow a student with a certified disability to have a tape recorder in class is disabling that student and is responsible for denying that student equal access and therefore equal opportunity to an education. The dyslexic-like disabled individual who chooses to deny his or her disability and chases after cures and attends remedial reading program after remedial reading program looking for the "right one that will teach me to read like everybody else," will be severely disabled and limited.

There is no rational reason that I can think of that should prevent people with a dyslexic-like disability from succeeding and becoming a happy, actualized, and contributing members of the community who can effectively deal with what comes their way. The biggest hurdle that a person with this disability must overcome is understanding the nature of the disability. The second hurdle is the lack of understanding, attitudes and behavior of the non-disabled person toward the person with the disability. One must ask, "Is a person with a dyslexic-like disability disabled or disabling?" Who is really disabled? Is the student disabled or is the teacher instructionally disabled? Is the child disabled or the parent who will not accept the disability? Which is more disabling to the dyslexic-like individual; the disability or the inability of others to accept his or her condition as a disability?

The important things to understand are that remeadiating the symptoms is of little value, is more likely damaging, and definitely will not cure the disability; the degree of disability fluctuates from moment to moment; and the choices that are made will determine how disabled a person is by his or her disability.

It has also been my experience that when the approach to dealing with these dyslexic-like disabilities is taken from the perspective of these conclusions, the results can be dramatic and the prognosis for academic and post-academic

success quite good.

Mr. Willard is a nationally certified professional counselor at The Access Center, Inc., Knoxville, TN. The Access Center is a non-profit agency established to provide direct services to individuals with dyslexic-like disabilities and information to others. Mr. Willard is also a popular seminar leader in the Southeast and is in the process of completing a video series titled, "A View From Within" which deals with several aspects of these dyslexic-like disabilities.

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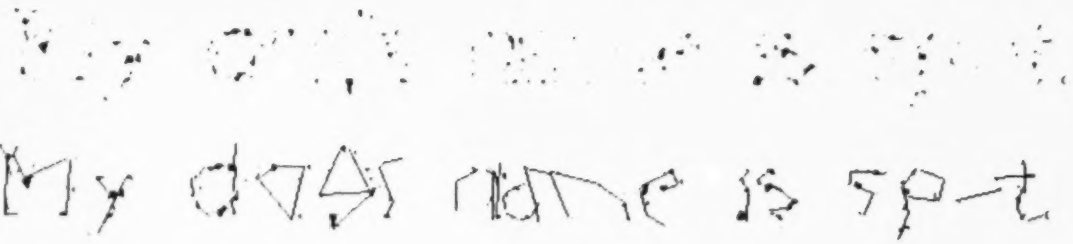
The Dyslexic Reading Process



Step 1 & 2

Step 3 mī dôgz nām iz spot

Step 4 & 5 mī dôgz nām iz spot

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This is the process that individuals with dyslexia must repeat for every word they read. The top line is what people with dyslexia see in their minds eye when they look at a printed word. They must then follow steps 1 through 5 before they know the meaning of the ***picture***. They must hear the ***picture*** before they know the meaning of the word. Keep in mind that you can only connect those fragments so fast. ***There is no known way to correct this perceptual fragmentation.***

- **Step 1. Connect the fragments**
- **Step 2. See (figure out) the pictures**
- **Step 3. Sound out the pictures**
- **Step 4. Hear the words**
- **Step 5. Know the meaning**

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